Indigenous Experience with Disability and Employment

Intersectionality Position Paper

By Community Futures Treaty Seven and RealEyes Capacity

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Executive Summary

This position paper explores the barriers and enablers of employment inclusion for Indigenous people experiencing disability in Canada – including the roles of Settler and Indigenous employment service providers. Indigenous peoples constitute the fastest-growing and youngest demographic in Canada, yet face disproportionate levels of disability and employment challenges. Disability among Indigenous populations is estimated between 33-50%, much higher than the 22% rate for non-Indigenous Canadians. Employment rates for Indigenous individuals especially those living on-reserve are also substantially lower than their non-Indigenous counterparts (47% vs. 74%).

Historical Context and Structural Barriers - Any analysis of employment and workplace equity for Indigenous peoples must acknowledge the impacts of colonization and settler colonial systems, which continue to shape economic participation, and settler-Indigenous relations. Canada's Indian Act created widespread social and economic exclusion, limiting access to education, employment, and self-governance. These factors serve as ongoing structural and societal barriers, and are not merely historical events.

Disability is viewed differently within Indigenous cultures, often framed as a natural variation as opposed to the settler-colonial construct of 'types of deficits.' This unique intersectional experience conveys that discrimination around both disability and Indigeneity *increases* outside of Indigenous settings. Settler-colonial policies continue to create structural barriers for both Indigenous individuals and those with disabilities. These include underfunded Indigenous employment services, little provision for supported employment, and settler service models which have yet to recognize the context for Indigenous equity, effective inclusion strategies, and the culturally unique perspectives Indigenous peoples have of disability and community.

Case Studies and Service Gaps – highlighted by CFT7, include employment service funding disparities, service gaps, and the exclusion of Indigenous job seekers from supported employment programs. Most provincial funders of supported employment do not provide funding on-reserve – and non-Indigenous services are rarely accessed due to issues of fear, trust and historical discrimination. Additionally, non-Indigenous service providers often misinterpret Indigenous clients' engagement issues as disinterest rather than issues of low confidence, anxiety, and/or responses to systemic discrimination and intergenerational trauma.

Our primary recommendation for service providers is the creation and implementation of an Intersectional Indigenous Inclusion Action Plan, including:

- Implementing TRC Calls to Action #57 and #92 into employment service policies.
- Providing Indigenous Equity training for service providers and employers.

- Develop collaborations with Indigenous organizations to 'inform action'
- Establish equity-informed, psychologically safe and healthy workplaces

Our conclusion is that service providers, as stewards of workplace equity, diversity, and inclusion, are uniquely positioned to support Indigenous inclusion, workforce development and reconciliation. Collaboration with Indigenous organizations is essential in order to learn more about the needs and barriers of Indigenous job seekers with disabilities. Informed, inclusive strategies are foundational to the provision of equity-based employment services, hiring Indigenous staff, and supporting employers to engage and include Indigenous / Intersectional workers. Through these strategies, Canadian service providers have the opportunity to demonstrate solidarity with Indigenous peoples – while engaging in the meaningful advancement of reconciliation, and supporting sustainable workforce development.

Indigenous Peoples – 2025

Indigenous peoples in Canada are comprised of three distinct groups; First Nations, Inuit and Metis, and at almost 2 million people, represent about 5% of the current population. The 2021 Census of Canada, shows that about 37.5% of 'Registered Indians' live on reserve and 62.5% live off reserve. There are over 630 First Nations Communities in Canada and over 50 distinct Indigenous cultures and languages. While the collection and reporting of disability statistics on reserve is limited, the rates of disability for this population are projected at 33-50% compared to 22% for non-Indigenous people. Statistics Canada disability rates for First Nations people living off reserve was cites as 32% in 2017. It is our belief that, disability prevalence on reserve, including undiagnosed / undisclosed disabilities, PTSD, anxiety and depression, exceeds 50%.

According to Statistics Canada, the 2021 Employment rates for Indigenous peoples living on reserve were 47% in comparison to 74% for non-Indigenous Canadians. Economic outcomes do not occur equally across all Indigenous identity groups, and are highest for Metis populations and lowest for First Nations peoples on reserve. While discriminatory views of Indigenous peoples persist, there is increasing recognition that their economic conditions are not of their own making but rather, a reflection of the many imposed barriers of Settler Colonialism.

A Context for Equity

In workforce development circles, equity is widely recognized as an essential strategy for attracting, including, and retaining workers. Workplace equity acknowledges that candidates and employees may face unique barriers to employment based on their identities and life circumstances. Applying an equity lens to talent attraction, recruitment, training, and retention

requires workplaces to consider individual needs and make adjustments to ensure equal experiences. Understanding the challenges faced by diverse groups—especially those with intersecting marginalized identities—helps workforce development professionals, including disability employment services, identify and remove barriers. These efforts ensure that candidate / worker identities are not the primary predictor of opportunities or workplace outcomes.

Intersectionality is known to increase barriers to employment and inclusion, particularly through attitudinal obstacles like discrimination. A 2024 KPMG survey of 1,000 workers with disabilities found that 44% had experienced workplace ableism in the past year, a figure that rose to 61% among Indigenous workers with disabilities.

Discussions of employment and workplace equity for Indigenous Peoples must acknowledge the ongoing impacts of colonization and settler colonial systems, which continue to shape economic participation, psychological safety, and settler-Indigenous relations in Canada. While these truths may be difficult for some Canadians to confront, meaningful progress requires understanding of the barriers Indigenous Peoples face. As historian Patrick Wolfe noted in 2006, settler colonialism is not just a historical event but an ongoing structure and set of relationships embedded in legal and political systems, designed to erase Indigenous populations. Recognizing this reality is crucial to advancing equity and inclusion in the workplace and beyond.

From Partnership to Domination

Colonization is about land and resources, and with confederation – 'Indian Policy' turned to assimilation. If Indigenous peoples ceased to exist as a partner in 'land-sharing' then all land could belong to Canada to be freely exploited by settlers and their government. Canada's first Prime Minister, Sir John A MacDonald helped create the British North America Act, or what is now known as the Constitution Act of 1867. This act placed Indigenous peoples under federal jurisdiction – an action which created an opportunity for Canada to circumvent previous treaties (such as the Royal Proclamation) negotiated between the Crown and Indigenous Nations, thereby creating a relationship based in the subjugation of Indigenous peoples and interests. When the facets of the Constitution Act pertaining to Indigenous peoples were consolidated into the Indian Act in 1876, the intent of Canada's leadership was made clear. Indigenous peoples were described as needing guardianship as they were now "wards, or children, of the State."

The Indian Act evolved into an oppressive and punitive act as Canada attempted to "get rid the Indian problem" as stated by Duncan Campbell Scott, Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs. The following were just some of the impacts of the Indian Act:

- Created the residential school system – removed 150,000 Indigenous children
- Made Indigenous ceremonies / cultural practices illegal
- Imposed an unfamiliar European Municipal gov model – replacing all self-governance
- Created reserve system – restricting travel and resource access
- Restricted ability to sell produce and livestock off-reserve
- Allowed for the 'expropriation' of reserve lands for public works
- Imposed a loss of status if Indigenous people attended university
- Denied / removed status from women
- Denied Indigenous people **the right to seek legal advice**

As part of Canada's settler colonial campaign to eliminate the Indigenous population, genocidal practices such as starvation, economic and capacity-building restrictions, and the removal of children from families became commonplace. There was no recourse for Indigenous peoples. They were segregated onto reserve lands and not allowed to leave without permission; it was illegal for them to seek legal counsel; they were not allowed to vote; and the RCMP were utilized by the state to ensure that children were given over to the residential school system. It is estimated that at least 6,000 of the 150,000 children forced to attend residential schools died, however, the administrators of these schools did not keep (or provide) accurate records so the actual numbers may never be known. As is made clear in records cited in 21 Things You May Not Know About The Indian Act, by Bob Joseph, (2018), the Department of Indian Affairs was well aware in 1914 that over 50% of the children were dying within the residential school system, however, it was maintained by the Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs that, "this alone does not justify a change in the policy of this department, which is geared towards a final solution of our Indian problem." The last residential school in Canada closed in 1996.

Canada's policies as enacted through the Indian Act had profoundly negative impacts on Indigenous peoples. The Indian Act was a policy created with the stated intent of absorbing and assimilating Indigenous peoples into settler-colonial society but its implementation was built on exclusion, segregation, and punitive measures which meet the definition of Genocide set forth in the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and punishment of Genocide. The damage inflicted on Indigenous peoples over 158 years of nationhood has defined Settler – Indigenous relationships and stands as the primary consideration in the 'context for equity.'

There are obvious connections between the Indian Act policies and economic participation – including employment, as well as on confidence, capacity, autonomy and self-worth. Inclusion in the workforce, accumulation of intergenerational wealth, family traits around education, and perceived social status have all occurred at far lower rates for Indigenous peoples than for settlers. These are some of the ongoing systemic and structural impacts of settler-colonialism.

Although the Indian Act has undergone multiple revisions since its inception, it is still the primary legislation governing Canada's relationship with Indigenous peoples.

A History of Disability and Work

It is difficult to engage in an historical exploration of Indigenous intersectionality with Disability as such research and documentation is extremely limited; this is consistent with the lack of social status of each group. There are also significant cultural differences between colonial and Indigenous perspectives on disability which we will explore further in this paper.

Regarding historical societal perspectives on disability, there is a clearly documented denigration and devaluation of persons with disabilities. As discussed by McNamara, (2021) in her article, Policing in the Age of the Asylum, early policies around poverty led to 'Workhouses' which became pervasive across the U.K. and colonial America (17th - 20th centuries). Unemployed or 'idle' people with disabilities were sent to workhouses, as well as to prisons and institutions. "Categorizing people in this way meant that disability as a policy question initially developed around goals to separate people based on their economic value and ability to work. This is perhaps one of the earliest examples of ableism and 'othering' in law and as such, persons with disabilities and mental illness were perceived as being 'abnormal' and of lesser value in society."

Canada played a disturbing role in disability policy and the promotion of an ableist culture. Disability was (and still is to some degree) framed within a medical model. This medical model was complicit in the creation of the Sexual Sterilization Act of 1928 in Alberta and BC, making Canada a world leader in eugenics through most of the 20th century. Minimally 4,400 people were sterilized (to prevent procreation) usually without their consent or knowledge – and in some cases under coercion. This continued until the act was repealed in Alberta in 1972, and BC in 1973. The vast majority of the people sterilized were people with disabilities and Indigenous women. While this history does not speak specifically to employment, it does speak to Canadian culture and policy with respect to the social status of Indigenous people and people with disabilities. The concept of 'cultural persistence' – the preservation of cultural traits, values and beliefs over time must be considered with regard to attitudinal barriers for both groups.

Current Status and Ongoing Inequities

Settler colonial societies perpetuate many of the attitudes and structures required to eliminate or subjugate a group of people – including many elements which contribute to higher rates of disability and/or lower rates of economic participation. Dismantling barriers inherent in these structures is critical. Negative impacts contributing to disability and poverty include:

- High rates of mental health conditions and negative health outcomes as a result of experiences of systemic racism and intergenerational trauma caused by the Residential School System.
- Poor maternal health outcomes for Indigenous women including, higher rates of prematurity, low birth weight, gestational infections, and illnesses.
- Fear of racism in the medical system is a deterrent to accessing care when needed.
- Indigenous parents less likely to disclose children's disabilities for fear of child removal.
- High rates of socio-economic marginalization have resulted in many Indigenous children living in poverty, which can affect their physical, cognitive, emotional and psychological development.
- 54% of children in foster care are Indigenous (5% of the Canadian population is Indigenous).
- High Indigenous poverty rates – with First Nations at 14.1% vs non-Indigenous at 7.9%.
- Indigenous communities are exempt from the Canada Labour Force Survey – the primary tool used by federal government to determine allocations of resources for employment development.

The preceding points play a significant role in the prevalence and impacts of disability for Indigenous peoples. Limited access to disability supports and funding for supports is common within First Nations communities, and provincial and federal governments often confuse the matter by engaging in ongoing debates about funding responsibilities and jurisdiction.

Case Study in Structural Barriers – Employment Service Funding

Community Futures Treaty Seven (CFT7) in Southern Alberta is an economic development corporation which receives federal funding for employment and business development supports from the Indigenous Skills and Employment Training (ISETS) program – with intermittent project funding provided by the province. CFT7 funds 11 separate career centres throughout the Treaty Seven region but does not receive dedicated financial resources for the supported employment services required by job seekers with disabilities. Supported employment services for job seekers with disabilities typically require more intensive and lengthier interventions – as well as employer engagement, onboarding and job retention supports – none of which are typically attached to 'generic' career development services. Within existing funding agreements, the CFT7 career centres are expected to 'integrate' job seekers with disabilities into their regular career development and training services – while carrying caseloads of up to 300 job seekers with various barriers to employment. Effective facilitation of supported employment services within high volume, generic career development models does not happen. Attempting to accomplish this task within settler-colonial funding models and outcome expectations, would simply divert an understandably disproportionate amount of career centre staff and resources

in order to meet the higher needs of a smaller group of job seekers. In Alberta, the primary funder for adults with intellectual/development disabilities is 'Persons with Developmental Disabilities' (PDD). They fund no supported employment services specifically for Indigenous peoples in the province of Alberta on or off reserve. While Indigenous job seekers with developmental disabilities are *eligible* to access supported employment services in Alberta's urban centres, fear and unfamiliarity with settler organizations and their processes limit the frequency of access. Although we cannot speak to the specifics of provincial funding for supports for Indigenous job seekers with intellectual / developmental disabilities outside of Alberta, it is reasonable to presume that the challenges described are experienced in other provinces as well.

Case Study in Structural Barriers – Non-Indigenous Service Provision

Service providers must consider unique challenges when supporting Indigenous job seekers with disabilities. Many mistakenly interpret anxiety and confidence issues as a lack of commitment or engagement. A settler service provider with whom CFT7 partnered observed unusually high dropout rates among Indigenous job seekers with disabilities. Interviews with this client-group revealed low confidence and a strong expectation of failure in both services and employment.

Within this Urban Indigenous Supported Employment Project, expecting Indigenous job seekers with disabilities to follow the same service continuum as non-Indigenous clients proved to be a barrier to success. A post-project analysis highlighted the need to integrate Stages of Change and Motivational Interviewing methodologies to help address anxiety and confidence challenges. Despite the presence of Indigenous staff in the project, greater collaboration with Indigenous organizations and Elders was identified as essential for fostering cultural pride and confidence.

Our survey of Canadian service providers confirms a perception of 'engagement and availability' challenges, and the majority of survey respondents do not have specialized programs or services for Indigenous job seekers with disabilities.

Much Indigenous Equity work remains to be done to ensure that Indigenous job seekers with disabilities have access to culturally safe services, with Indigenous staff members and collaborations. Recognition of the context for equity as well as a need for supports which intentionally address psychological health and safety as a factor in engagement is critical.

Indigenous Perspectives

Consideration of Indigenous belief systems, 'lifeways' or 'ways of knowing' as we explore the intersectionality of disability and Indigeneity is important. The assumption that Indigenous peoples view, or even experience, disability in the same ways settlers do must be challenged. In terms of reconciliation and fostering reciprocal relationships with Indigenous peoples, settler-based service providers have a responsibility to learn new perspectives from Indigenous people.

Dr. Grant Bruno, an Assistant Professor in Pediatrics at the University of Alberta, is a father to two autistic children and is a member of the Samson Cree Nation in Treaty 6 Territory, Alberta. Bruno states, "My tribe, the nêhiyaw (Plains Cree), recognises the gifts of autistic people and is encouraged to spiritually understand and celebrate neurodivergence. Elders and traditional knowledge keepers that I have personally worked with would often describe autistic people as gifted, and these gifts can vary from person to person." Bruno also states that another nêhiyaw term for autism translates as 'given the gift of moving and being different' and that within nêhiyaw culture, autism is seen as a diverse and unique state to be accepted and celebrated. Bruno advises that prior to European contact, these perspectives "would have encouraged a supportive and inclusive society that was based on relationality and connection."

Sandra Yellowhorse, Dene Scholar and Storyteller speaks of disability within the context of K'e, a Dene Navajo lifeway based in relationality. "the stories about our disabled relations are about *k'é*—specifically, its unique way of caretaking *all* our relations—both human and non-human. Within this, there is an understanding of diversity, need, traits, uniqueness, and differences that we all have. Yet, those are all framed within the context of community. Therefore, disability is a relational and collective concept."

Consideration of the relationality of people and community is essential. In Indigenous cultures community is all important; the land they share, the cultural identity they share. Caring for the people in the community is a relational accountability and as such, under the social model of disability, the Indigenous person with the 'impairment' experiences less disability within their own community. Indigenous people with disabilities are less likely than non-Indigenous people to identify as having a disability. There are a number of known and probable reasons for this. First, disability as we know it, is a colonizer concept defined and framed within medical, economic, education, and policy paradigms. Disability is not always accepted as a core identity by Indigenous peoples to the extent that their Indigeneity is. In terms of imposed limitations, barriers and 'status' being Indigenous in a settler colonial society may be just as impactful as experiencing disability – a settler colonial 'identity construct' based in exclusion. Dr. Rheana Robinson, a member of the Manitoba Métis Federation, researches Indigenous perspectives of disability at the University of Northern British Columbia. She states that, while there are words

in Indigenous languages that describe specific mental and physical limitations, “disability, as a colonial and socially constructed term that is often positioned in a deficit-oriented framework does not exist.” – Native Women’s Association of Canada Magazine, Issue 25, May 2024

Living in an imposed environment of scarcity, as Indigenous peoples often experience living on reserve, can result in limited access to resources. In terms of accessing employment services, many Indigenous people with disabilities worry that disclosure carries stigma and could impede positive outcomes – for example, acceptance into a trades training program. There are additional concerns for Indigenous people with disabilities in terms of finding work and risking loss of disability-based income assistance programs. Understandably, mistrust of settler colonial systems heightens this worry. Concerns around the psychological harm caused by interactional racism are common among Indigenous job seekers and those with intersectional identities experience combinations of both racism and ableism in work environments.

Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action and UNDRIP

As a nation, Canada has recognized that significant injustices have occurred, many of which are ongoing. The Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, published in 1996, served as something of ‘a public awakening’ to the dismal state of Crown-Indigenous relations and created a 20-year agenda for change including many recommendations (most of which did not occur). The Commission was clear as to their assigned work, “There cannot be peace or harmony unless there is justice. The Commission’s conclusions were equally clear, “Our central conclusion can be summarized simply: *The main policy direction, pursued for more than 150 years, first by colonial then by Canadian governments, has been wrong.”*

One of the recommendations of the Royal Commission was a call for public inquiry into the residential school system. In 2008, The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established with the primary goal of hearing the stories of survivors of the residential school system and to inform all Canadians about the impacts and the legacy of the residential schools. It is important for Canadians to understand that this school system was mandated by Canada’s Indian Act, and that Canada’s first prime minister, Sir John A MacDonald, was a co-author of the ‘Gradual Civilization Act’ – which later transformed into the Indian Act of 1876. It is equally important to recognize that this act *remains* the primary legislation governing Crown-Indigenous relations.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s (TRC) report, released in 2015, was informed by interviews with over 6,000 Indigenous survivors affected by the Residential School System. The TRC put forth 94 Calls to Action in support of transparency around the Residential School System – and in support of healing the damage caused, as part of reconciliation. According to the Yellowhead Institute, only 14 of these 94 calls to action have been completed since 2015.

There are two calls to action that can apply to the work of the Employment Inclusion Sector:

#57 Professional Development and Training for Public Servants

"We call upon federal, provincial, territorial, and municipal governments to provide education to public servants on the history of Aboriginal peoples, including the history and legacy of residential schools, the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, Treaties and Aboriginal rights, Indigenous law, and Aboriginal–Crown relations. This will require skills-based training in intercultural competency, conflict resolution, human rights, and anti-racism."

In the absence of specific mention of the disability and employment inclusion service sector, this government focused call to action can reasonably be applied to a sector exclusively funded and monitored by government.

#92 Business and Reconciliation

We call upon the corporate sector in Canada to adopt the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* as a reconciliation framework and to apply its principles, norms, and standards to corporate policy and core operational activities involving Indigenous peoples and their lands and resources. This would include, but not be limited to, the following: *abridged*

> ii. Ensure that Aboriginal peoples have equitable access to jobs, training, and education opportunities in the corporate sector,
>
> iii. Provide education for management and staff on the history of Aboriginal peoples, including the history and legacy of residential schools, the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, Treaties and Aboriginal rights, Indigenous law, and Aboriginal–Crown relations. This will require skills-based training in intercultural competency, conflict resolution, human rights, and anti-racism.

Call to Action 92 can be utilized by any employer (including service providers) to guide Indigenous recruitment, and equity initiatives. Calls to Action 57 and 92 can easily be applied to informed policy creation around Indigenous Equity in recruitment, organizational collaborations and equity-based services for Indigenous job seekers with disabilities.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) is cited many times as a critical element in a framework for reconciliation. On June 21, 2021, Canada created an UNDRIP Act to "develop a national action plan, strategies, and other concrete measures to achieve the goals of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.

Articles 17 and 21 in the UNDRIP speak specifically to employment inclusion – Article 21 takes the additional step of addressing disability-based intersectionality.

Both the UNDRIP Act of Canada and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action are invaluable sources of information to guide settlers in steps towards Indigenous equity and inclusion initiatives, reconciliation, and honouring the treaties. It is our position that service providers, as stewards of workplace equity, diversity, and inclusion, are uniquely positioned to support Indigenous inclusion and reconciliation by collaborating with Indigenous organizations, providing equitable employment services for Indigenous job seekers, hiring Indigenous staff and educating employers on strategies for engaging/including Indigenous workers.

Success and Collaboration – Case Studies

CFT7 and Service Provider Collaboration

Johnathon Red Gun, the Disability Employment Program Coordinator at Community Futures Treaty Seven (CFT7) has been collaborating and partnering with non-Indigenous Service Providers since 2007. As part of capacity building within the Disability Employment Program and for the 11 CFT7-funded career centres throughout Treaty 7 territory, Johnathon connected with non-Indigenous supported employment 'leaders' in the region including Sean McEwen, a designer and director of employment services in Calgary. Initially, this connection was characterized by regular conversations and exchanges of ideas and knowledge. CFT7 needed to know more about serving job seekers with disabilities as well as the 'supported employment' models utilized by settler service providers. Services, including those Sean directed, needed to know more about serving Indigenous job seekers with disabilities – and the kinds of systemic barriers faced by this group. It became apparent very quickly that there were significant resource disparities between settler organizations and Indigenous organizations; Sean's organization, one of 16 employment service providers in Calgary, had approximately 10 times the dedicated budget and staff budget for serving people with disabilities that CFT7 had for the entire Treaty 7 Region.

Both organizations began learning from each other and sharing their professional networks with each other. Training around disability awareness and service provision was organized for Indigenous Career Practitioners working at CFT7 Career Centres. Sean's team members and their networks were invited to CFT7 conferences and events – and were often invited to participate in event organization committees. Through these exchanges of ideas and labour, relationships, trust and knowledge increased, paving the way for more collaborative work including a supported employment project for Indigenous job seekers with disabilities living at Tsuut'ina First Nation, which borders Calgary. This Service Canada-funded initiative served Indigenous job seekers with disabilities from May 2008 to March 2011. Tsuut'ina Nation members were hired to work on the project with the expressed goal of transferring supported

employment knowledge to Indigenous Career Practitioners so that they could continue to provide supported employment services on-nation beyond the scope of the project.

The project built new relationships and trust between a non-Indigenous service provider and Indigenous organizations/communities. There were significant increases in service provider understanding of intersectionality, structural barriers and equity in service provision. It also became easier to meet funder criteria stipulating collaborations and partnerships with Indigenous organizations. In summary, the benefits were extremely reciprocal; the project built the capacity of Indigenous services, as well as that of the settler organization partner.

Interviews and Themes in Employment and Service Access

Indigenous People with Disabilities

We interviewed two Indigenous Entrepreneurs with disabilities, one of whom identifies as an Indigenous person with a disability – and the other who identifies as Indigenous only. Both of the interviewees cite mentorship from other Indigenous people as having been important to their success. Both individuals have had experiences with discrimination based on Indigeneity. One individual described their employment / self-employment journey as 'easy' and the other described theirs as 'very difficult.' Both had help from Indigenous Career/Business Centres.

What, if anything, would you like Employment / Career Development professionals or Employers to understand about working with Indigenous people with disabilities?

Interviewee One – "I've come to understand that Indigenous professionals understand the challenges that Indigenous people face. What makes a difference is access to resources and support. All Indigenous workforce professionals should have the same access to resources, funding and other opportunities."

Interviewee Two – "Disabilities can be anything. We're not just alcoholics, and we don't just live on the street. We're normal, you know what I mean. And especially for the people on reserve, if you guys (CFT7) can get (business) classes out there, it gives us more opportunity and jobs,.."

Indigenous Career Practitioner Perspectives

Several 'on reserve' Indigenous Career Centres completed the survey CFT7 provided. At least three of these career centres are providing some element of disability-inclusive services

including on-reserve work experiences, annual resource fairs for people with disabilities, and employment service / training program accommodations for individuals who disclose disability.

Challenges cited included low rates of disclosure – resulting in career practitioners not being aware of accommodation needs; staff needing more training on disability and supported employment, and inadequate funding / resources to effectively serve this group.

Successes described for the respondents who have provided disability-specific services and supports include pride and confidence – both for the job seekers and the staff supporting them, as well as an intention to continue and expand these supports within resource parameters.

Settler Service Provider Perspectives

Survey responses were limited to 16 despite being distributed quite widely. We received surveys from service providers in Alberta, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Manitoba and Saskatchewan. With such limited representation from across Canada, we found most value in the comments around challenges organizations experienced serving Indigenous people with disabilities:

- Knowing who the stakeholders are and addressing transportation issues.
- Barriers to services such as wait lists can deter people. - Difficulty contacting clients
- Historically, Indigenous job seekers have not been motivated to attend sessions and do not follow through with services.
- We often rely on disclosure and are concerned with getting into tokenism with specific activities targeted only to (Indigenous job seekers).
- We can serve all demographics but should be better versed in recruiting and serving Indigenous persons with disabilities.
- There is so much to learn about reconciliation. - We can and need to do more admittedly.
- We have several employees of different nationalities. We do not distinguish between them.

Indigenous Elder Perspectives

Two Indigenous Elders were consulted on this position paper: Betty Anne Little Wolf, and Tom Little Bear. Interview questions were based on advice for services, employers and job seekers.

Service advice – Elder Betty Anne advises that accessibility of facilities needs to be improved and cautions career practitioners about a primary focus on disability, saying “Our people don’t want to be treated differently if they have a disability.”

Elder Tom’s advice to career practitioners is to “Be more available to talk to students and help them explore schools and community resources.”

Employer Advice – Elder Tom advises employers “To be mindful and have a respectful approach with how we welcome them or accommodate them.” Elder Betty Anne advises to “Treat everyone equal. Our people are shy and like to keep private but will accept support in their careers or place of employment. Employers should talk with employees privately, do not make it obvious. Our people, mainly our men, are shy.”

Elder Tom’s advice for job seekers focuses on self-awareness and support; “They must have a good idea what their capabilities are and what obstacles they face, not limit them but to guide them and accommodate them. Have people who can relate to their circumstances.”

Serving Indigenous Job Seekers with Disabilities

There is no clearly established way for settlers and settler organizations to engage in Indigenous Equity Work. Nevertheless, it is essential that the effort is made, and that informed perseverance towards reconciliation, and resurgence becomes a collective commitment within the employment inclusion sector. Ignoring this equity work risks signifying to Indigenous peoples that service provider commitment to equity is selective, and acceptance of a complicit role in colonial harm. A sincere movement towards solidarity with Indigenous peoples is the opportunity before us.

Providing effective, culturally safe services to Indigenous job seekers with disabilities requires an awareness of equity, Indigenous narratives, and a commitment to building trust. This creates a foundation of understanding for the necessity of the various elements of equity which would reasonably apply to working relationships between settler organizations and Indigenous organizations, communities and people, including those with disabilities.

A key consideration is the organization’s reputation: Is it known and trusted by Indigenous organizations and referral sources? What is the service experience of Indigenous clientele? Do these job seekers see their identities reflected in staff and other clientele?

Service environments may reinforce settler colonial norms. Elements that may seem neutral—barriers between people, clocks in every room, boardroom tables with authority figures at the head—can signal a prioritization of settler, hierarchical values that may feel exclusionary. Creating inclusive services may require rethinking spaces to align with Indigenous worldviews, such as using circle seating to foster equality, or the addition of visible Indigenous place names.

Beyond awareness, organizations must act on Truth and Reconciliation Commission calls to action to demonstrate a willingness to shift power dynamics and center Indigenous voices. Given the long history of structural racism and harm inflicted by settler social service

institutions, meaningful relationships and collaborations with Indigenous communities are essential.

Service providers must also recognize that disability is a colonial construct that may not align with Indigenous perspectives. In settler society, disability often carries stigma, but many Indigenous people may not identify with this label—especially given the historical lack of trust in diagnostic and social service systems. Limited access to diagnoses in Indigenous communities may further complicate disclosure. Understanding these dynamics is crucial.

Community Futures Treaty 7 has found that introducing the social model of disability and promoting disability pride can help reframe colonial narratives, fostering greater comfort with this intersectional identity. By adopting such approaches, Indigenous job seekers with disabilities can be supported by organizations in ways that respect and align with their cultural contexts.

Adapting Service Models – Equity-Based Service

As discussed in the Service Provision Case Study, Indigenous job seekers with disabilities typically face barriers with which settler organizations are often unfamiliar, including, higher levels of anxiety about accessing services as well as lower levels of confidence about service outcomes. These same anxiety and confidence issues can be applied to meeting employers, interviewing and starting employment. It is essential that service providers are informed about such considerations and that they have mechanisms in place to monitor and reduce anxiety and to build confidence – including identity-based confidence. This mandates collaboration with Indigenous knowledge keepers (career professionals, community members, Elders). Service providers must also consider the many systemic and structural barriers that Indigenous job seekers with disabilities face. Both Indigenous people and people with disabilities experience higher rates of unemployment, higher rates of poverty, poor health outcomes, and more direct experience with discrimination. Intersectionality statistically increases all of these barriers and can impact negatively on the availability of resources for transportation and communication, as well as pre-employment considerations such as work clothes, training, etc. Intergenerational experiences with systemic, structural and interpersonal racism have created significant issues of trust and trauma for many Indigenous people. Settlers without training in Indigenous Equity and anti-racism may struggle to understand and accommodate the psychological health and safety needs of Indigenous staff and clientele. Addressing such training needs is imperative.

Indigenous job seekers with disabilities are too often deemed as ‘not engaged’ or not ready for employment for all of the above described reasons. What may not be recognized is that there are additional barriers that come with intersectionality that are not being understood or effectively addressed by service providers. Service provider staff who misinterpret barriers as a

lack of job seeker engagement and commitment may demonstrate judgmental or unwelcoming attitudes and demeanors – an additional consideration in job seeker anxiety and 'service drop-out.'

Service providers play an important role in supporting employers with equity, diversity and inclusion. Ensuring that employers are aware of Indigenous equity considerations and the need for workplace cultures that reflect a commitment to workplace psychological health and safety are important strategies for recruitment, training and retention success. The provision of resources which inform and educate employers on Indigenous employment equity and inclusion can help support success as well. Communication and collaboration with Indigenous organizations can also help service providers connect with welcoming employers and Indigenous employers in order to support positive employment outcomes.

Our recommendations for service providers seeking to effectively support Indigenous job seekers with disabilities are to recognize the context for equity, and build into policy and practice, an Indigenous Inclusion Action Plan which reflects the following priorities:

- Adoption of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action (#57 and #92), including staff training, and utilization of these calls to action to create an Indigenous Equity Policy.
- Accessing cultural awareness training from regional Indigenous peoples and organizations,
- Identify and implement strategies and activities for collaboration with Indigenous organizations, -Staff training in equitable employment services for Indigenous job seekers, including Motivational Interviewing and Stages of Change approaches to confidence building,
- Collaborative strategies for the recruitment of Indigenous staff,
- Creation of Equity-based Workplace Psychological Health and Safety policies and protocols,
- Development of staff capacity to provide employers with information, resources, and/or strategies for effectively engaging/including Indigenous workers.

Engagement and Recruitment Strategies

Some of the most important lessons in the effective engagement and recruitment of Indigenous workers comes from Northern and remote regions of Canada where Indigenous peoples comprise between 20 and 86% of the population. This population composition necessitates the hiring of Indigenous workers to meet the workforce development needs of companies operating in these regions. In 2019, The Conference Board of Canada released a report entitled 'Working

Together: Indigenous Recruitment and Retention in Remote Canada.' (MacLaine, Lalonde and Fiser). Although the report focuses on recruitment in Northern communities, the conclusions and best practices identified can easily be applied throughout Canada. The Working Together Report specifies many recommendations around Indigenous recruitment and retention, including:

- Build trust and genuine understanding with Indigenous communities and leaders.
- Partner with Indigenous communities on recruitment campaigns and job opportunities.
- Offer pre-employment training. Prepare employees and develop confident staff.
- Implement effective and meaningful inclusion practices ensuring that employees feel valued.
- Offer mentorship, coaching, and/or cohort programs to help Indigenous people integrate.

In addition to these recruitment and retention recommendations, the collective feedback of the employers surveyed, specific to 'most effective strategies' is described in the following table:

Table 6
Most-Effective Recruitment and Retention Strategies

	Strategy	Theme
1	Training and development programs	Education/training
2	Working with Indigenous communities and groups	Collaboration
3	Inclusion and diversity policies and strategies	Cultural awareness and Inclusion
4	Attending job fairs or career days	Collaboration
5	Working with community groups and agencies	Collaboration
6	Anti-racism or cultural awareness training for current employees/management	Cultural awareness and inclusion
7	Working with, and recruiting through, educational institutions	Collaboration
8	Adapting work schedules to accommodate hunting and/or other cultural activities	Cultural awareness and inclusion
9	Assistance planning career and advancement pathways	Education/training
10	Offering flexible work arrangements (e.g., late/early start/finish; four-day week; 10 days on/five days off)	Cultural awareness and inclusion

Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

Indigeneity and Disability are highly underrepresented – and even underrecognized in the business community. The 2020, Inclusive Futures Report on Indigenous engagement in Canada's workforce, cites research describing 85 percent of corporate Canada as "unaware of local Indigenous communities or their potential to address labour and business needs." The report also cites factors that employers/service providers can use to create a framework for the measurement of progress and success with Indigenous recruitment including:

1. The number of Indigenous people employed by an organization,

2. The opportunity for Indigenous employees to engage in training and upskilling,
3. Access to Indigenous cultural competency programs and spaces for cultural practices, and
4. The evidence of champions of Indigenous culture within an organization / leadership.

Service providers can apply these factors to both recruitment of Indigenous staff – and can easily adapt this information to service provision to Indigenous job seekers. CFT7 supports such framework and strategy development to improve the participation of Indigenous workers with disabilities in the workforce. Given that funder Requests For Proposals increasingly require collaborations with Indigenous organizations / communities, and capacity to serve Indigenous job seekers, such frameworks support access to funding and service sustainability.

Conclusion

Service providers, as stewards of workplace equity, diversity, and inclusion, are uniquely positioned to support Indigenous inclusion, workforce development and reconciliation. An awareness of the context for equity for Indigenous job seekers with disabilities, is a necessary foundation for this work. The impacts of Indigenous identity and perspectives on disability within settler contexts are key areas of learning for service providers. Collaboration with Indigenous organizations is essential for deep learning about these issues, as well as the needs and barriers of Indigenous job seekers with disabilities. Informed, inclusive strategies are foundational to the provision of equity-based employment services, hiring Indigenous staff, and supporting employers to engage and include Indigenous / Intersectional workers.

Settler colonial dismissal of Indigenous worldviews has resulted in inequities in community development work. Service provider partnerships within Treaty 7 have clearly demonstrated an increase in service provider capacity, sustainability and reputation through reciprocal Indigenous relationships and collaborations. Canadian service providers have the pivotal opportunity to demonstrate solidarity with Indigenous peoples – while advancing the inclusion of Indigenous people with disabilities as part of Canada's sustainable workforce development strategy.

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